

*The Impossible, Patience* by Alejandro de Acosta is a collection of essays exploring the interplay between anarchism and nihilism. While we have seen the excellent essay *Green Pessimism Or Cosmic Nihilism* get a lot of attention over the years, we have seen relatively little discussion about the many other worthwhile essays in the collection.

In *History as Decomposition*, de Acosta engages with both Fredy Perlman's and the Situationists' critiques and framing of History, and offers much for radicals to consider in their engagement with and understanding of same.

The full text of *The Impossible, Patience* is available on the anarchist library, and for sale by Little Black Cart:

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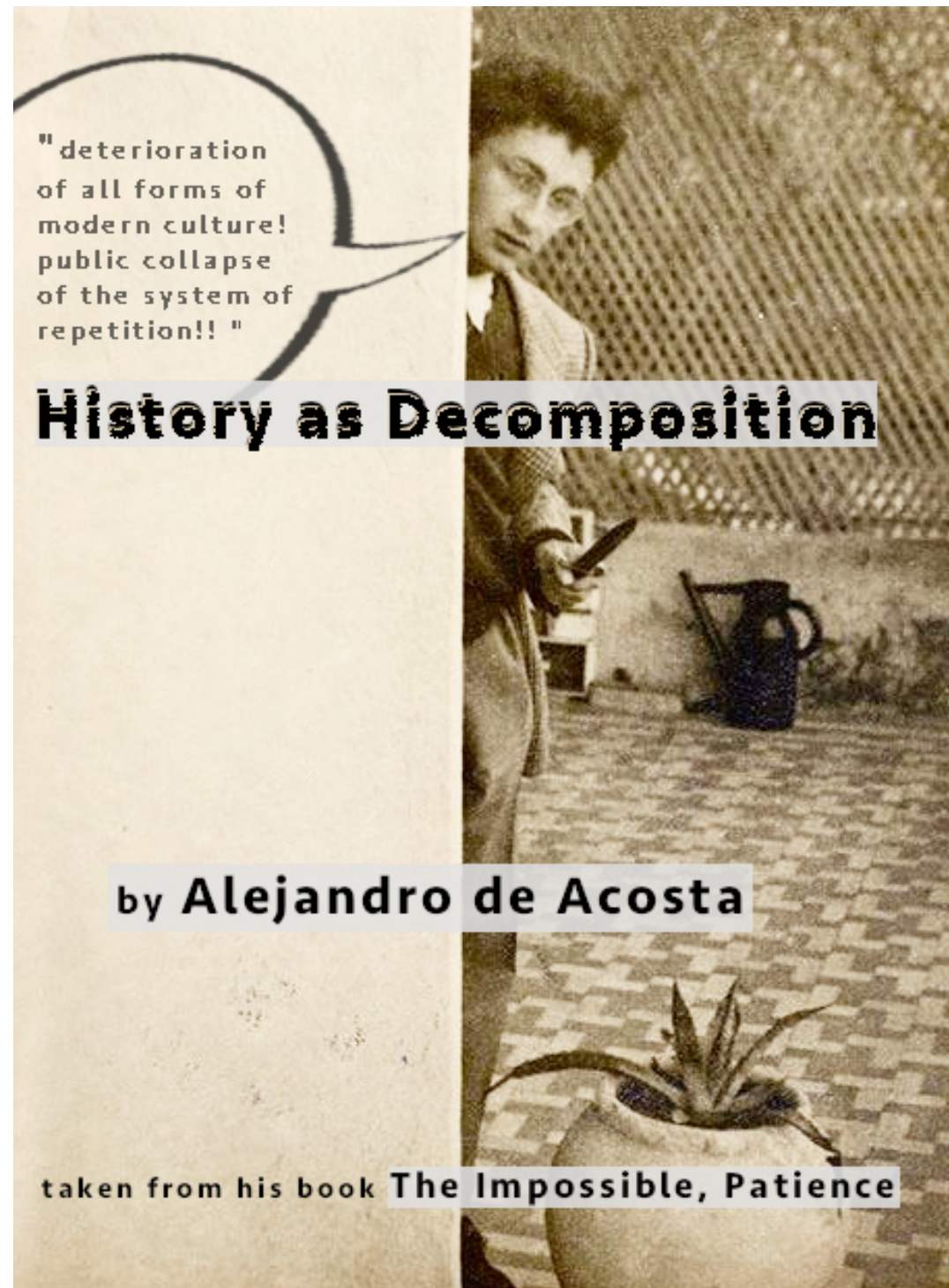
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Those who echo an ancient military rhetoric, invoking necessity in the political and historical senses, drawing lines and insisting “now or never” as if by habit, will always confuse the problem of nihilism. The few of us who feel it as a *problem*, and only secondarily, if at all, as a position, understand that we cannot divide ourselves from decomposition to diagnose it and to act on it. Our psychology is anti-political, so we have to explore in other ways. Our awareness of decomposition leads to certain insights that are disconcerting and fascinating as well; they may well be visions from outside Civilization. This awareness informs our action without distinguishing us from events. I am referring to what is most question-worthy: the passing sense of the weird and meaningless way in which things happen, beyond causality and so beyond lasting explanation. I am referring to what might be called events as signs of non-events, or historical events as masks of non-historical events. **So if and when we call ourselves nihilists, know that we are wearing a mask.** It might be what we need to face others in decomposition. Facing them we might also come to understand Baltasar Gracián’s saying,

*It takes more today to make one sage than seven in years gone by, and more to deal with a single person than an entire nation in the past.*

Forward by Alejandro de Acosta, situating this essay in *The Impossible, Patience*:

*“History as Decomposition” was first anonymously published in 2013 in the “journal of collision” Attentat. I hereby clone it and republish it under the name A. de A., inserted into a middle place in the trilogy I mentioned before “Its Core is the Negation”. It is an extension of some of the ideas in a presentation about time for the BASTARD conference in 2012. But that presentation happened before the conception and writing of “Its Core is the Negation”, which this essay directly followed.\* As though, after the schematics of “Its Core”, older concerns needed to be restated, reinterpreted. At the same time, almost immediately, the stakes of writing about nihilism began to shift around me: upsurge of the parody I had predicted. In any case, I imagine all of this information might make it possible to read it differently. This is also probably the best place to acknowledge the stimulating company of the Austin Anarchist Study Group; our reading of Perlman was helpful in articulating my ideas. They are present elsewhere in this collection as well.*

\* “Its Core is the Negation”, also published in *The Impossible, Patience*, approaches nihilism via a reading of Duane Rouselle’s book *After Post-Anarchism*. In “Its Core”, de Acosta considers the issue of politics versus ethics, as well as the differences between universalism, relativism, and nihilism.

## § 1

Supposing the word is in one's vocabulary, it is easy enough to dismiss others as nihilists in deed or in intention. Like atheist, the term first appeared as an accusation. Used in this traditional manner, it is a simple way to pathologize your enemies. Many dedicate their time to this kind of symptomatic hand-wringing. It places your enemies in accepted moral scripts that redefine them in a range from careless to evil. It is more difficult, but hardly a great feat in itself, to declare oneself a nihilist. In its simplest form, this is to perversely and excessively embrace being dismissed as a badge of difference and pride. In a more developed form, it is to argue and act from a range of positions we currently recognize mostly by slogans of the "no future"/"everything must be destroyed" sort. A more difficult variant of the embrace of the term is one that claims it drives a wedge between two kinds of nihilism. Whether they are posited as two visions of the Void or different methods of destruction (moral and anti-moral, social and anti-social), this version of the nihilist position is ultimately descended from a distinction made by Nietzsche between active and passive nihilism. But the Nietzschean inheritance is double: there is the above-mentioned wedge position; and there is the diagnostic sense of nihilism. The latter suggests understanding a condition psychologically, as Nietzsche did in his late notebooks, or metaphysically, as Heidegger did in his Nietzsche seminars. Such attempts to diagnose render very difficult the separation of the thinker and the thinking, the writer and the writing, from the condition (which may be understood as a corrosive phenomenon variously affecting a place, a time, a culture, a civilization, an empire, and so on).

Now and then the diagnostic sense reappears, severed from the wedge-distinction. In recent years some have taken up the diagnosis of the nihilistic society as the most powerful tool of a kind of critical theory (and, probably unbeknown to them, a contemporary echo of the traditional use of nihilist as an accusation). At the same time, others have taken up the wedge, severed from the diagnosis, as their way of distinguishing a nihilist position that is able to act in a space clear of social

## § 13

Returning to the analysis of nihilist positions with which I began, I would say that the wedge position and the diagnostic one, the active nihilist and contemplative critical-theoretical appraisal, are both the results of running the Nietzschean diagnostic through a political machine, turning its psychology into political psychology. And **the political machine is one of the devices of decomposition**. To appraise all of society critically, or to divide the friend and the enemy once and for all, are the respectively theoretical and practical Ur-operations of politics. All debate about the priority of the one over the other aside, I recognize in them the basic moves of the constitution of a *polis*.

*The councils represent order in the face of the decomposition of the state...*

wrote Vaneigem in his "Note to the Civilized." It is possible to read this, not as the political opposition of order and chaos, organization and disorder, but as an understandable misprision of the tension that, whoever wins, pushes decomposition farther by temporarily concealing it. And in this temporary concealing, followed by its inevitable unconcealing, it pushes nihilism farther in its diffuse, passive, social direction. Unitary urbanism...

*May 1968 revealed to a great many people that ideological confusion tries to conceal the real struggle between the "party" of decomposition and the "party" of global dépassement*

wrote Vaneigem in 1971. Quotes or not, what he is invoking are parties, sides. The entire text "Terrorism or Revolution" is based on the wedge, drawing lines and making the same kind of claim we have by now become used to: "this is the highest stage," or its variant, "if not now, never." These claims issue from a confusion deeper than ideological confusion, the confusion that is decomposition.

## § 12

In sum, the perspective that says that decomposition is the logic of His-Story elucidates two things. First, that we were right to deny Progress; second, that we are not believers in its opposite, an inverted Regression away from a golden age. As I imagine it, a principal characteristic of whatever preceded His-Story (civilization, etc.) would be its neutrality, its stony silence at the level of metanarrative. **Rather than Progress or Regression we could describe historical decomposition as the accelerating complication of events. This acceleration is violent and dangerous.** Here and there an eddy may form in which things either slow down or temporarily stabilize in the form of an improvement. What we can say with some certainty is that as historical time elapses, things get more complicated; and that these complications so outrun their antecedents that the attempt to explain retroactively becomes ever more confusing.

Situationally, we may be getting some purchase for the moment, an angle, a perspective. But what Debord perhaps could not admit, what Perlman perhaps understood, is that decomposition had always been there in our explanation, our diagnosis, and the actions they are said to justify; and that His-Story is decomposition's double movement: as Civilization unravels, it narrates its unraveling. The dead thing, Leviathan, organizes life, builds itself up as armor in and around it (which would include machines and a certain stiffening of postures and gestures, and concurrently thinking and action, in human bodies). But the dead thing remains dead, and it breaks down. It functions by breaking down. It creates ever more complex organizations (analyses of behavior) that then decompose, i.e. break down.

implosion.<sup>[46]</sup> By that I mean: to distinguish the destructive action that comes from agents in the milieu (or our presumed allies) from the self-destruction, implosion and dissolution, of social forms and probably of society in general. Both are done with too much ease precisely to the degree that they ignore each other.

There are a few of us, at least, for whom nihilism is a vital problem in a way that exceeds the action of the wedge and the contemplation at work in the diagnosis. It is something I feel I have to think through, as well as live out; and neither of the above ways of understanding it seems sufficient. I suspect that this means that the problem is not what it was. (Or at least that, like Nietzsche, I feel implicated in the diagnosis.) We are not satisfied with lining up the conditions and our position, saying: our epoch (dominant moralities, culture, civilization, etc.) are nihilistic, and so are we—as if we were merely expressing the disintegration around us as theory or as smashy. Even to say that there is a general tendency and that some we is pushing it farther, driving it to its limit, etc. sounds perilously close to the old Communist idea of exploiting the contradictions of capitalism so as to overcome it. The question always remains as to whether that we, at the farthest reach, at the limit, is not doing the innovative work that future systems will be built upon. From this questioning **we may take “no future” and “everything must be destroyed” less as slogans of a supposedly self-evident sort and more as dark mottos** that guide our explorations of a complicated and dangerous terrain.

[46] Two examples in terms of recent writing in the anarchist space would be *Whitherburo*, for the first, and the “Editorial Statement” in *Lawless*, for the second.

## § 2

I begin with the wedge position, not the isolated diagnosis, because I feel closer to it. But I also need to set out what separates me from it, since I do not understand by what criterion one could claim to clearly distinguish what is on either side of the wedge.

*Our nihilism is not christian nihilism.*

*We do not deny life*

wrote Novatore, who, inspired by *The Antichrist*, was perhaps able to live out or live with the wedge position. Well, as with much of what he wrote, I am inclined to say that I share his perspective, but with a superadded sense of uncertainty. The uncertainty arises from a sense of impossibility, the impossibility gaining the proper distance from society, Humanity,

*... the collective tempests and social hurricanes ...*

insofar as today this society-weather is a technological issue and not merely a spiritual one. —Did I write *spiritual*? I might as well have written psychological, or mental, or referred to character, taste or temperament. All I have done here is enumerated the beginning of a list of phenomena that we only know in their ruination, or, in political terms, in and as their complicity with mass phenomena. Or, in ethical terms, through their betrayal.

I may well deny life, if life is unlivable: narcotic life, cyborg life. And the nihilist position we both claim and seek—for us it is never simply not Christian, just as our atheism echoes the atheism of those raised with religion. A certain kind of transition is at stake:

*By becoming aware of spectacular decomposition, a person of ressentiment becomes a nihilist. Active nihilism is prerevolutionary. There is no consciousness of transcendence without consciousness of decomposition. Juvenile delinquents are the legitimate heirs of Dada*

wrote Vaneigem. Here the wedge is something else: not their

suppose many of our friends to be. And yet a few of us have had to abandon this temporal logic, the apparent necessity of the highest stage. For us it has come to seem a rhetorical crossing of the wires, where description spills over into prescription.

Psychologically, it makes sense: to insist that this is the highest stage and the final moment means that if you have any inclination to act against Empire et. al., you must do it now! *Hic rhodus*, etc.

— *This is the place to jump, the place to dance!*

that is how Fredy began, too.<sup>[52]</sup> But, as I have noted, he did not end there, but in ambiguity, in questions. Our thought decomposes, too...

[52] *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!* goes back to Marx and Hegel, of course. In the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx writes of a situation “in which retreat is impossible.”

I would suggest that all of the interminable discussions of cycles of struggle, the various and competing periodizations of capitalism and technology (for starters), especially as they have desperately sought to appraise and orient us in terms of the history of the twentieth century, have been deceptive. They have traced outlines of decomposition without discovering their complicity in its logic. Yes, decomposition tempts everyone to periodize. To each her own perverse history. Think of our pastimes—think of gossip! Think of the idle talk of generations or decades in discussions of the character of individuals, their politics, or their modes of consumption of culture. What we bring forward in such sleepy analyses of culture and character are our own repetitions, our own novelties, our own crappy contributions. It is the work of culture, after all. Some of us feel a need to remain silent, sovereignly neutral, in the face of this folk art of milieus and subcultures.

It could be good practice, at least, for it is just this neutral gaze with which we have learned to read certain of our contemporaries.

*Empire is not the crowning achievement of a civilization, the end-point of its ascendent arc. Rather it is the tail-end of an inward turning process of disaggregation, as that which must check and if possible arrest the process.*

wrote Tiqqun. This perspective seems close to the one I have been elaborating here. But they immediately follow that proposition with:

*At first glance, Empire seems to be a parodic recollection of the entire, frozen history of a “civilization.” And this impression has a certain intuitive correctness. Empire is in fact civilization’s last stop before it reaches the end of its line, the final agony in which it sees its life pass before its eyes.*

It is just this familiar reference to the final and highest stage towards which we have become skeptical. We are as eager to find a way out of the process, supersession or overcoming, as we

nihilism and ours, but nihilism as consciousness, active nihilism as the transition between ressentiment and revolution; the tempting idea that the symptom will become the cure. I do think one can describe the difference between active nihilism and passive nihilism as an awareness. I do think that awareness matters in terms of how one might live beyond ressentiment and beyond the spectacle of society. But I must part ways when it comes to describing awareness as prerevolutionary (or, for that matter, anyone as the legitimate heirs of Dada, tongue in cheek or not).

Some of us need to experience the full consequences of this parting of ways. This means to show and to witness what the awareness of decomposition is now or to us, and what it contributes to stating the problem of nihilism as some of us understand it. **What is most dramatic in this new understanding is the tension between realizing that this is a new understanding, one that is of our time, and simultaneously that we are grasping to what extent the question of nihilism has become detached from a historical understanding.**

### § 3

Of the definitions offered in the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, two are notable for their recent underemployment: *unitary urbanism and decomposition*.<sup>[47]</sup>

Unitary urbanism: *The theory of the combined use of arts and techniques as means contributing to the construction of a unified milieu in dynamic relation with experiments in behavior.*

This is the most noticeably obsolete of the situationist definitions. It suggests to those familiar with the early SI the exploration of the city as the setting for the practices of constructing situations, psychogeography, and the wandering they called *dérive*. The city figures here as a “unified milieu.” If unitary urbanism has been abandoned, it is because that side of the SI was not of much use to anyone—to the popularizers *or* the inheritors. Tom McDonough explicates the project competently enough:

*There was, in fact, a curious strain of situationist thought, little remarked today, that was precisely concerned with the destruction of the subject, with the vision of a new, malleable humanity. This vision was particularly apparent in early discussions of the construction of situations and the linked problem of unitary urbanism, both of which were conceived as means of inciting new behaviors, and as such would have access to all the methods offered by modern technology and psychology. That peculiar neologism, “psychogeography,” conveyed exactly this desire for rational control over ever greater domains of life.*

[47] The definitions have had remarkably different fates. *Situation/situationist/situationism* have been discussed on and off as needed (now and then some of us enjoy pointing out the third of these to those that need a clarification). *Psychogeography/psychogeographical/psychogeographer* have, for better or for worse (probably for worse) turned out to be the most harmless of the bunch, leading to a variety of popularizations in contexts often disconnected from the rest. Of the two usually untranslated terms, the fate of *dérive* has been tied to the psychogeography bundle, though I’m not sure it had to be. *Détournement* has also inspired both popular (cute) and unpopular (perverse) forms. The Great Web entertains with plenty of both; neither has any lasting importance.

Thus my penchant for the wedge position, insofar as it affirms active nihilism without positing something else after it; thus my insistence on some version of the diagnosis—the awareness of decomposition that is part of our thinking, not the contemplation of a historically achieved reality to be understood historically and overcome by making history!



## § 10

As to incoherence, this remark was aimed at the anarchists Debord knew, not the ones we know. But one might say that the “incoherence” of “aiming at the absolute” is precisely what our discourse will sound like to someone who still and always relies on historical explanations. What we are doing with history is what Debord himself recommended we do with decomposition: to turn it against itself parodically, in *détournement*. And here the third rule of *détournement* applies:

*Détournement is less effective the more it approaches a rational reply.*

I took the phrase “awareness of decomposition” from Vaneigem. I have already cited part of the passage:

*People of ressentiment are the perfect survivors—people bereft of the consciousness of possible transcendence, people of the age of decomposition. By becoming aware of spectacular decomposition, a person of ressentiment becomes a nihilist. Active nihilism is prerevolutionary.*

The age of decomposition: a global diagnosis. It is populated by two types: people of *ressentiment*, survivors, are those who continue to believe in progress and contribute to processes of decomposition. Artists or not, their production is repetition. These are the passive nihilists of the wedge position. The person who is aware of this, aware of decomposition, thereby becomes an active nihilist. For Vaneigem this is prerevolutionary; it is not for the likes of Novatore, or many of our friends these days. But what studying *Against His-Story* perhaps shows is that the *pre-* in *prerevolutionary* has something of historical progress about it. As though there really were three stages and the middle one was conscience, consciousness, awareness! **To take up nihilism as a problem today means precisely this: that nothing in particular seems to us prerevolutionary because revolution sounds too much like decomposition to our ears.**

Just a strain. But the popularizers were never concerned with such dramatic changes to our lives. And the inheritors—here I mean those who, like Fredy Perlman, translated and expanded on the ideas of the SI—understood sooner or later, if not immediately, that this strain represented a wager the SI played and lost. The side of the optimistic, the historically rational in the SI—the defense, therefore, of progress, a possible progress buried but to be unearthed (a common enough story for communists and many anarchists, of course)—was ravaged by historical and political events. Without entering into a detailed discussion, I think it is fair enough to say that the last fifty years have been all about “inciting new behaviors” and the confluence of “modern technology and psychology.” In some inverted sense, unitary urbanism was realized—by its enemies.

Decomposition, on the other hand: who has really thought this idea through? In one sense the definition seems to belong to the same strain of Situationist thought that opted for unitary urbanism.

*Decomposition: The process in which traditional cultural forms have destroyed themselves as a result of the emergence of superior means of controlling nature which make possible and necessary superior cultural constructions. We can distinguish between the active phase of the decomposition and effective demolition of the old superstructures—which came to an end around 1930—and a phase of repetition that has prevailed since that time. The delay in the transition from decomposition to new constructions is linked to the delay in the revolutionary liquidation of capitalism.*

The first sentence certainly appeals to the same sense of progress. Such progress would be predicted and measured according to “superior means of controlling nature” (in French the phrase is *domination de la nature*). As the means appear, cultural forms destroy themselves, a necessary sacrifice, one might suppose, for progress to carry on. In the most immediate sense, which relates decomposition to art movements, this corresponds to the

*active and critical*

destruction of forms (so wrote Anselm Jappe) that came to a head with Dada but could include Impressionism, Symbolism, Futurism, Cubism, and so on. What follows troubles this interpretation, however. It seems that “around 1930” everything was marching according to plan. Since then decomposition carries on as

*empty repetition,*

(Jappe again) which would mean that cultural forms farcically continue to destroy themselves without any “new constructions.”

*The decomposition of artistic forms has thus become perfectly concordant with the real state of the world and retains no shock effect whatsoever.*

In other words, the eternal return of an Art that was declared dead countless times—its repeated resuscitation by the market. This dynamic of repetition is referred to a “delay” in the “liquidation” of capitalism. The dynamic of decomposition in the arts is coupled with the impasse in urbanism in the “Basic Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism”:

*The development of the urban milieu is the capitalist domestication of space. It represents the choice of one particular materialization, to the exclusion of other possibilities. Like aesthetics, whose course of decomposition it is going to follow, it can be considered as a rather neglected branch of criminology*

wrote Vaneigem and Kotányi. The necessary question is why one will follow the other. (A provisional answer is that the unity of the phenomena under investigation is revealed when one notices that separate spheres are decomposing in the same way. It could also be that it is in the realm of aesthetics that the awareness of decomposition is greatest, and that the awareness accelerates the process, so that other separated spheres of life must follow it, at least for now.)

Foucault’s attempts to write what he called histories of the present could be described as last-ditch attempts to see what could be done with history; but even he, in his wise ambivalence, wrote history as genealogy. The genealogical perspective sometimes locates or even summons counter-histories, but usually only the lives of the infamous:

*Lives of a few lines or a few pages, nameless misfortunes and adventures gathered into a handful of words. Brief lives, encountered by chance in books and documents. Exempla... not so much lessons to ponder as brief effects whose force fades almost at once.*

It is the awareness of that fading, another name, perhaps, for decomposition, that we can no longer do without.

One could reply that in my presentation of this awareness, in the overall thrust of this essay, I have exemplified the anarchist allergy to history that Debord diagnosed in *Society of the Spectacle*,

*It is the ideology of pure freedom, an ideology that puts everything on the same level [qui égalise tout] and loses any conception of the “historical evil” (the negation at work within history). This fusion of all partial demands into a single all-encompassing demand has given anarchism the merit of representing the rejection of existing conditions in the name of the whole of life rather than from the standpoint of some particular critical specialization; but the fact that this fusion has been envisaged only in the absolute, in accordance with individual whim and in advance of any practical actualization, has doomed anarchism to an all too obvious incoherence.*

I would answer: as to losing any conception of the negation at work in history, yes, excessively, I hope. Evil is not a term I find useful. But the **negative or destructive side of history is for some of us more or less all that history has been or done.** In the strict sense, nothing is being worked on or built up in or through history. The places, people, and events in past time that we enjoy or claim, appreciate or appropriate, must be creatively reidentified as non-historical, extra-historical, or anti-historical currents. There may have been, may continue to be what Foucault called insurrections of subjugated knowledges: counter-histories. It is true that certain moments of revolt are coupled with strange perspectives on history. But it is also true that these counter-histories have an odd way of becoming ordinary histories, either by incorporation into universal His-Story, its narrative, or by becoming the local his-stories of smaller groups and communities. As the latter they may have a temporary or even long-lasting protective effect for those groups or communities, but they weigh in the same way as His-story on those who purposely or accidentally put in their lot with them.

What decomposition seems to mean so far is that if material conditions do not improve along the lines of true progress, culture breaks down. It changes, yes; but these changes are to be understood as a self-dismantling, and then the indefinite repetition of that self-dismantling. When Vaneigem composed his enumeration of “Theoretical Topics That Need To Be Dealt With Without Academic Debate or Idle Speculation,” he included

*Dialectics of decomposition and supersession in the realization of art and philosophy*

but there is room to question whether what is under consideration here has a dialectical structure when the supersession (*dépassement*) never comes. **Decomposition can be provisionally interpreted as the invocation of an ethico-political ideal against an aesthetic one, the refusal of the new in art, or even the refusal of art as such, insofar as, in its separated existence, it cannot act on the economy, cannot alter material conditions. But it can also be seen as a way of beginning to understand the “delay” from within the “delay”; and in that sense already suggests the refusal of the production of the new in every sphere when we are aware that it is empty repetition.**

#### § 4

This tension between longing for supersession, if not progress, and refusal of the present can be detected everywhere the term was used by Debord—already, for example, in three proto-Situationist texts of 1957. “One Step Back,” published in the journal *Potlatch*, opens by invoking

*The extreme point reached by the deterioration of all forms of modern culture, the public collapse of the system of repetition that has prevailed since the end of the war...*

and on this basis warns:

*Undoubtedly the decision to make use, from the economic as from the constructive viewpoint, of retrograde fragments of modernism entails serious risks of decomposition*<sup>[48]</sup>

The risk being to participate in decomposition (as opposed to contesting or undoing it) by hanging on to the creations of the past, now shattered by that decomposition into fragments. “One More Effort If You Want to Be Situationists” is notable for its parenthetical subtitle, “The SI in and against Decomposition”:

*The Situationist International exists in name, but that means nothing but the beginning of an attempt to build beyond the decomposition in which we, like everyone else, are completely involved. Becoming aware of our real possibilities requires both the recognition of the presituationist—in the strict sense of the word—nature of whatever we can attempt, and the rupture, without looking back, with the division of labor in the arts. The main danger lies in these two errors: the pursuit of fragmentary works combined with simpleminded proclamations of an alleged new stage.*

[48] Parenthetically, this text accuses members of the Lettrist International of “a certain satisfied nihilism”, presumably deploying the term in its isolated diagnostic sense.

#### § 8

**Awareness of decomposition is then, most immediately, a new kind of diagnosis of the present and an alternative to historical thought. This diagnosis belongs to the subversive current; it does not take place in isolation.**

**We are and are not Society.** We know we are in—we do not know if we may be out of—decomposition. In this awareness we discern that decomposition is not Decline, as though the film of Progress were run backwards. Decline as a general logic would mean that everything gets worse. But the idea here is to undermine any global, world-historical scale for judging what is better or worse. Only from within decomposition has Progress seemed possible; and only from within decomposition would history appear to be complete disaster, or completely anything (the victory of one race, culture, or religion, for example, as vindicated by history, or the defeat of another). Such an awareness could come as a shock. It could lead to the denial of temporal logic (order, progress, explanation, justification). But it is not a relativism that flattens out the differences between events.<sup>[51]</sup> It may amount to a perspective from outside civilization.

[51] That it could lead to the denial of temporal logic does not mean that it is the denial of what I called above “cosmic time.”

optimistic aspects that it bore in its first situationist version. By making the process of breakdown primary, he invented a new kind of diagnosis of the present, and a new way to understand history. This diagnosis suggests:

1. That history, as a whole or in segments, has not been progressive, in either a linear or cyclical way, but rather a process of increasing complication, destructiveness, falling apart of previous epochs (along with their attitudes, ideas, practices, and so on).

### **Corollary:**

The very phenomenon of history (as His-Story), its possible unity as narrative and idea, is peculiarly undergirded by this process, which is itself a fragile hanging together of fragments of fragments, endlessly shattering, strangely recombining, giving most observers the sense of “delay.”

2. That what we might be inspired by in history has to do with turning decomposition against itself in the negative manner of détournement. Or, as some friends recently put it,

*we locate ourselves within the subversive current of history that willfully attempts to break with the ongoing progress of society. To identify this negative movement, or this subversive current, is to lose, to give up on, the sense of “delay” and to become aware of decomposition.*

*At this moment, decomposition shows nothing more than a slow radicalization of moderate innovators toward positions where outcast extremists had already found themselves eight or ten years ago. But far from drawing a lesson from those fruitless experiments, the “respectable” innovators further dilute their importance. I will take examples from France, which surely is undergoing the most advanced phenomena of the general cultural decomposition that, for various reasons, is being manifested in its purest state in western Europe.*

Most of those who would have spoken of progress in 1957 would have said it was farthest along in Western Europe or the United States! So decomposition is clearly a place-holder for progress-delayed. The article contrasts the bleak terrain of what “decomposition shows” with the description of the nascent group as the “beginning of an attempt to build beyond it”—beyond what it shows. That same year, the booklet *Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency*, presented by Debord at the founding conference of the SI, significantly broadens the sense of the term. In some places it seems we are still asked to think about what is a dead end in art. In others, though, it seems **we are being asked to consider the dead end of culture itself:**

*Decomposition has reached everything. We no longer see the massive use of commercial advertising to exert ever greater influence over judgments of cultural creation; this was an old process. Instead, we are reaching a point of ideological absence in which only the advertising acts, to the exclusion of all previous critical judgments—but not without dragging along a conditioned reflex of such judgment.*

[...]

*The history of modern culture during the ebb tide of revolution is thus the history of the theoretical and practical reduction of the movement for renewal, a history that reaches as far as the segregation of minority trends, and as far as the undivided domination of decomposition.*

## § 5

Look at “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” a piece that Debord published in *Internationale Situationniste* 1 (the same issue as the definitions). The fifth thesis begins:

*We are excluded from real control over the vast material powers of our time. The communist revolution has not yet occurred and we are still living within the confines of decomposing old cultural superstructures.*

The seventh thesis adds:

*The practical task of overcoming our discordance with this world, that is, of surmounting its decomposition by some more advanced constructions, is not romantic.*

For Debord decomposition was always a cultural phenomenon. Faced with art objects, mass media contents, and with their commodity-forms, the situationist would only respond that they were to be seen as the products of decomposition. I think this illuminates the accompanying definitions: *détournement* is a way to refuse to produce new decomposing art, provisionally turning decomposition against itself by rearranging existing elements; *dérive* and psychogeography are techniques for wandering in, and analyzing, cities that one has no idea how to transform, in search of the elements to be transformed. These are the practices of “building beyond” decomposition. All of this unfolds in a larger “presituationist” historical framework in which “the communist revolution has not yet occurred.”

Not yet... Almost ten years later, Debord did not make much of decomposition in *Society of the Spectacle*. He mentions in a few theses in the context of cities and in the context of the implosion of modern art. More or less the original context and usage, then:

*The mutual erosion of city and country, resulting from the failure of the historical movement through which existing urban reality could have been overcome, is reflected in the eclectic mixture of their decomposed fragments that blanket the most industrialized regions of the world.*

## § 7

I am not sure how to answer these questions, nor do I think Fredy knew how. He begins the penultimate chapter writing about his impatience to finish the story, the book... to finish *His-Story*. It is not much further on that the last passage I cited continues:

*... when there are no others, when Leviathan is One, the tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing, is almost at an end.*

*Civilization, synonym of Capital, Technology and The Modern World, called Leviathan by Hobbes and Western Spirit by Turner, is as racked by decomposition as any earlier Leviathan. But Civilization is not one Leviathan among many. It is The One. Its final decomposition is Leviathan's end. After twenty centuries of stony sleep vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, the sleeper is about to wake to the cadences of a long-forgotten music or to the eternal silence of death without a morrow.*

This passage is deeply ambiguous. Is the image offered here of “final decomposition” another version of the “delay”? Or is the word final to be taken literally, meaning that decomposition—and so history—are coming to an end? And is this end itself the result of a certain accumulation of complications, a tension to be understood naturalistically and ecologically, as the resonance of the primordial accident? Are those who are aware of this decomposition even a little set apart from it through this knowledge? Can they move in a way that does not belong to its process?

*it is not yet known ... if the new outsiders do indeed still have an “inner light,” namely an ability to reconstitute lost rhythms, to recover music, to regenerate human cultures.*

*It is also not known if the technological detritus that crowds and poisons the world leaves human beings any room to dance. What is known is that Leviathan, the great artifice, single and world-embracing for the first time in His-story, is decomposing.*

What is clear is that Perlman broadened the relevance of decomposition by definitively breaking with the progressive and

That is, Sumer is the place of an accident; and the Leviathan is the generalization and reproduction of that accident. To say it is an accident is to say that the accident was a contingent event, an event that did not have to happen.

**2.** Every Leviathan is in a state of decomposition (its artificial life in some sense is decomposition). Perlman hints at this throughout the book until putting it plainly towards the end, referencing “*the decomposition that accompanies every functioning Leviathan.*”

**Corollary:**

The scribes (historians, intellectuals by extension) are trained not to see the decomposition as such.

**3.** Once the decomposition of a given Leviathan is complete, its decomposed fragments can reorganize into a new Leviathan.

*We’ve seen that earlier Leviathans were always in a state of decomposition. When one decomposed, others swallowed its remains.*

Or should this be:

**3.** Once the decomposition of a given Leviathan is complete, its decomposed fragments will reorganize into a new Leviathan.

It is difficult to say. It is clear enough that the beginning of the process is accidental. But is its unfolding accidental? Is the movement of complication from one Leviathan to another, the increasing globalization of decomposition, a process that Perlman thought of as necessary?

As is well known, although the communist revolution had “not yet” occurred in 1967, either, Society of the Spectacle did include some proposals as to how to bring it about. For many, the way in which the book has continued to be important is in its theory of spectacle and separation, which could be considered a way to understand decomposition writ large. The counterbalancing notions of “cultural” resistance, *détournement*, *dérive*, and situation are only hinted at in its theses, while a great emphasis is placed on the worker’s councils, which were to bring about the revolution that had “not yet” occurred...

Around the same time, Vaneigem raised a more troubling question:

*In the end, by dint of identifying ourselves with what we are not, of switching from one role to another, from one authority to another, and from one age to another, how can we avoid becoming ourselves part of that never-ending state of transition which is the process of decomposition?*

How long until “not yet” turns into “never-ending”? How long can a “delay” be? And consequently, **how long until a provisional idea of culture as decomposition develops into another idea about culture— about civilization itself?**

## § 6

To my knowledge no one has underlined Fredy Perlman's transformative use of decomposition in *Against His-Story*, *Against Leviathan!*. He introduces the term in a passage that could be used to explain one of the ways in which the situationist critique of culture was transformed in the direction of the current array of primitivist, green anarchist, and anti-civilization perspectives.

*The death of Egypt's gods is recorded. After two or three generations of Pharaoh's protection, the figures on the Temple walls and pillars no longer jump or fly; they no longer even breathe. They're dead. They're lifeless copies of the earlier, still living figures. The copyists are exact, we would say pedantic; they seem to think that faithful copying of the originals will bring life to the copies.*

*A similar death and decomposition must pale the songs and ceremonies as well. What was once joyful celebration, selfabandon, orgiastic communion with the beyond, shrinks to lifeless ritual, official ceremony led by the head of State and his officials. It all becomes theater, and it is all staged. It is no longer for sharing but for show. And it no longer enlarges the participant, who now becomes a mere spectator. He feels diminished, intimidated, awed by the power of Pharaoh's household.*

*Our painting, music, dance, everything we call Art, will be heirs of the moribund spiritual. What we call Religion will be another dead heir, but at such a high stage of decomposition that its onceliving source can no longer be divined.*

The situationist inheritance is clear.<sup>[49]</sup>

[49] The other possible source for some of Perlman's uses of this term would be Jacques Camatte. But his use of it is closer to the SI than to Camatte. They probably have a common source in Marxist theory of the early twentieth century.

Ritual and repetition replace life and creative action. Except this is not the decline of art, but *art itself as decline*. Decomposition is presented here not as the culture of an advanced technological society whose history has stalled on the way to communist revolution; not the culture of the "not yet", but culture *as such*. This is one sense, and one source, of what is called Civilization in the perspective of anti-civilization thought. An attitude that Debord outlined with respect to capitalist or spectacular culture was now shaken loose from its grounding in our epoch, and granted the broadest historical sweep possible. *Has all history been decomposition?*—But if the answer to this question is affirmative, then the very notions of epoch and historical sweep (let alone spectacular and capitalist culture) have to be re-evaluated from the perspective that has redefined decomposition. **The priority of organization and breakdown are reversed, and the breakdown is now primary—primordial.**

To detail this anti-historical grasp of history, I will need to isolate a conceptual core in *Against His-Story*, *Against Leviathan!* <sup>[50]</sup>  
Three axioms:

1. History (not as cosmic time, but as His-Story) begins accidentally, as the runaway cascade of problems and complications beginning with a situation of ecological imbalance; this event is also the constitution of the first Leviathan.

### Corollary:

The Leviathan places human beings in a situation they do not meet anywhere else in the Biosphere except in rare places like Sumer.

[50] I think for too long this essay has been relegated to the realm of appreciative private readings on one hand, and public dismissals (on grounds of romanticism) on the other. I found another way to read it, so I am propagating it.